FAITH IN CRISIS
MATTHEW 14:22-33
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BETHANY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
LAFAYETTE, INDIANA
JOHN M. BUCHANAN

The strange events related in Matthew 14:22-33 are among the better known in the life of Jesus. "Walking on the water" has become the popular idiom for divinity and supernatural power. Ordinarily in this sense it is employed negatively; for instance, when some saintly soul needs to be brought down to size we may say, "Well after all, he doesn't walk on water." Beyond that, it pushes us to the very edge of credibility. Like the story of the woman whose twelve year hemorrhage stopped when she touched Jesus' robe, this story is one that a lot of people passionately wish were not in the Biblical record.

It is well known, in addition, because a famous painting has been done of Peter sinking in the waves and Jesus reaching out to save him. It's a strong symbol. Most people have known what it feels like to be sinking - to have the rug pulled out - to have life coming in the form of powerful, twenty-foot breakers. And, consequently, most people have felt that desparation that motivated Peter to call out "Save me, Lord."

It's a popular story, but my intuition tells me that we'd better deal with the events themselves before we try to reflect: that we'd better look at the whole miracle question before we try to discover God's word in the text. Because, unfortunately, for many people any rationale reflection on the meaning of the miracle stories begins and ends with the question: "did it really happen that way?" or, "Did it happen at all?"

I continue to discover that children are, philosophically, the most honest people around. The theologian in my family - the one who always wants to know "how God got born", put me up against the wall last Monday night. I was tucking him in and we were talking a little, and he said, out of the blue, "Daddy, I don't know about some of the stories I hear." I asked him waht he meant because all we had been discussing was the football game on television. Well, he allowed as how these stories about Jesus bothered him: particularly he was concerned with the parting of the Red Sea and the children of Israel walking through on dry land. The clincher - the theological juggernaut was - in his words: "I never saw any stuff like that."

That was Monday night. On Tuesday morning I discovered that there was authoritative philosophic precedent for my little friend's experience. A long time ago the German philosopher Lessing put it in these words: "Miracles that I see with my own eyes and have

an opportunity to test personally are one thing; miracles that I only know through history, that others claim to have seen and tested, are quite another. Reports of miracles are still far from being miracles." i.e. he never saw any stuff like that either -

Let's begin with the disciples and look carefully at what happened. They were not naive, gullible men. They didn't know as much about the world and natural laws of cause and effect as we do, but they knew enough to conclude that men don't ordinarily walk on water. And so they reacted in the same way we would under the conditions: they were frightened - they thought they were seeing an apparition - a ghost: they didn't even recognize who it was.

On the basis of just that much we have to conclude that something awesomely signigicant happened to them out on that lake: something important enough that they came back and talked about it: important enough so that the early Christian Church remembered it and wrote it into the record some 25 or 30 years after the fact.

Let's grant that much, and then let's grant that ordinarily at this point we're asking the wrong questions: for the issue is no longer "What happened exactly?" but "what does it mean?" The trouble is that it's extremely difficult to describe some things. Bob Newhart does an excellent and very funny piece that illustrates the point. He is an executive with a manufacturer of games and one day receives a telephone call from a man by the name of Abner Doubleday. It seems that Mr. Doubleday has created a game involving nine men, a bat, a little white ball, four bases, three strikes, four balls, three outs. And the way Newhart strings it out it's apparent that an academic description of baseball is ridiculous apart from the experience of baseball.

Or more immediately, consider the recent abundance of U.F.O citings. The people who have seen them are quite certain of the experience. I remain totally skeptical. I haven't had the experience: it is not true for me.

Jesus, himself, played down the significance of the miracles, almost as if he anticipated the trouble they would cause later. He criticized people for wanting a sign: he refused to jump off the temple in order to prove a point one time. And most significant of all; he consistantly ordered people not to tell what had happened when they experienced the miraculous. Obviously, he didn't want people following him because he was a miracle

worker. Nor, we may conclude, does he want our faith to depend on the miraculous.

Rightly understood, a miracle is any event that convinces us of the power and presence of God. I would offer that as a new definition of miracle - "any event that convinces us of the power and presence of God."

The right question to ask then, when we're looking at this story is not "what happened:" but, what experience of faith is being described here? To what is the New Testament writer testifying?" And when we begin to run on that track several possibilities suddenly are open. I find three in this text that address the immediacy and intimacy of our lives. One - in the real life and death crisis ~~lives~~ Jesus was absent. Two - when he showed up, no one recognized him - but he came anyway. Three - Peter's half-hearted, unstable faith was enough. Jesus rescued him. Let's examine them.

The disciples in the boat in the middle of a raging storm weren't having a prayer meeting. Rather they were engaged in a rather routine task when a crisis was thrown at them. They had started across the lake - a journey of about 5 miles and at 3:00 A.M. a sudden wind squall hit. And in meeting the crisis they weren't thinking about God or Jesus or faith: there were too busy, frantically doing what needed to be done to stay afloat.

I've never been in that particular set of circumstances, but I have lived through some crisis situations that demanded action immediately, and so have you. But then afterward, sometimes, we ask "Where was my faith?" Somewhere along the line we've heard that when the chips are really down a man ought to be able to rely on his deepest religious convictions. But for most of us that only happens in books. We sense that we've met our crises as they came, without prayer, meditation, or any awareness of God at all. And that is exactly the picture of the disciples that I see in this text; men in crisis, doing the best they could to resolve it - and that's all.

That's a comfort to me, because honest people acknowledge that most of life is lived apart from any awareness of God. What bothers me is that we spend so much time being concerned about it: and that people stay away from church because they don't feel religious 24 hours a day - even though the Bible doesn't have it that way at all.

This story begins realistically - where we are - and undergirds our experience by

saying there's nothing wrong with you if you are not aware of God - or turned on by Jesus - every waking moment. But then it points to the miracle. In a time of real crisis God is there. You may not know it: you may not recognize him: but count on it. He'll be there. That was the experience of the disciples that they brought back and talked about. They were frightened by what happened: they didn't recognize him - but he came and shared the experience with them.

Did you ever consider the possibility that you may be looking for God in the wrong places? Like in Church - or reading the Bible: while the Biblical witness is that he comes to men at unexpected times and in ways that are not always obvious.

In an excellent book, "To Believe Again" Helmut Thielicke writes:

"Faith is often conspicuous by its absence. How few moments there are when I can consciously recognize that I am performing an act of faith, when I can establish completely clearly and unambiguously, ("Now I believe"). Furthermore, faith is unstable. Sometimes on a quiet evening, perhaps after hearing Bach's St. Matthew Passion, I am filled with faith.. But the next morning it takes only one low blow... to snuff out that feeling again." (P.70)

We've experienced that. OUr faith is like a yo-yo Up and down. It can appear and disappear several times in the course of a day. I've come down here on Sunday morning with a thousand things on my mind, irritated, impatient, wishing for all the world that I was still in bed. And in the course of an hour been so moved by our experience that I couldn't begin to describe it. And, of course, the reverse has happened.

Jesus did tell his disciples, on occasion, when he would come to them and where they could expect to find him. In one memorable story he said he'd be in the sick man, the naked, hungry, blind man, the man in prison. And when you think about that for a moment you realize that we are so offended - that our middle class, antiseptic sensitivities are so repulsed by these types - Types - that we go out of our way to avoid them. They are the last people in whom we expect to confront our Lord.

So I'm never too surprised when people come to church looking for God and fail to find him. For what the Bible teaches is that he will come to us in ways we least expect. Worship becomes that celebration of God finding us - in the incarnation - in Jesus Christ

and his constant coming to us out of the everyday people and ev ents of our lives.

Have you ever experienced a miracle? An event that convinced you of the power and presence of God? I would suggest that you have - but that you haven't even called it by name. In a major theological work dealing with the significance of the death of God movement and the secularism of our age, Langdon Gilkey maintains that all men experience some sense of ultimacy - or God - at the extremes of human life. So, when I think of miracles - that is, experiences that have broken through to me with a new awareness of God, I think inevitably of birth and death: of the birth of my children - of life ending at the side of a sick bed. And although I realize that I cannot make my experience yours, I have known - with all the certainty in me - the presence and power and love of God. Nothing about those experiences had to do with my faith - my education - my profession - my commitment. My faith at the moment was on the shelf: rather the experiences were given to me. And only years after am I abl e to identify them for what they were: miracles: God coming - God breaking through in the middle of a crisis.

So - the men in the boat, and Christ coming to them. And Peter, alone decides to take a chance: to get out and walk on the water. And Peter alone - because he took the chance - almost drowned. And Peter - alone - experienced the saving power of Jesus Christ.

Talk about mixed motives! Talk about doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, or the wrong thing for the right reasons. Peter did it again: so enthralled with the experience he couldn't leave well enough alone: maybe he was overcome with faith: maybe he was on an ego trip. In any case he got out of the boat. And as ambiguous as it seems, we have to conclude that Jesus had something like that in mind: that Jesus preferred the impulsive faith that was willing to take a chance rather than the reflective, introspective faith that examined all the alternatives, measured the risk, and concluded that it was safer to stay seated.

Back in the sixties, when ministers were packing their bags and going south to participate in Civil Rights demonstrations there was a lot of talk about risk and motivation, There were a lot of suggestions about martyrdom and the good feeling that accompanies suffering a bit for one's convictions. And so they went - took the risk - got beat up and spat on - and unceremoniously slapped in jail. And then they came back and talked

about God coming - about the miracle of love and brotherhood and communion happening in their stinking cells. And that, I believe, will be the lasting effect of their experience: not that they changed history - because they didn't. But that for once in the life of the American Church - some people got out of the boat and walked on the water, albeit briefly - and when they sank, they experienced the miracle of God's power and presence.

In any case, at the decisive moment Peter's faith fled. He had bravely stepped out onto the water - in rather clear symbolism - took his eyes off Jesus - and promptly sank. And if there is one lesson to be learned about faith in this passage it is here: not that you'll sink if you don't keep looking at Jesus. But that even when you stop looking: even when your faith makes a hasty exit - God does not leave you.

Again Theilicke says it beautifully: "Our faith's grip on the father may loosen. But he in whom we believe holds us fast in his grasp. ...the decisive events between God and me do not happen in my psyche, my consciousness, at all: they occur in the heart of my Lord. Here (and only here) there is constancy and faithfulness.. even though my fever chart fluctuates between faith and little faith, between trust and doubt..." (P.70)

That is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the Good News. God saves us - we don't and can't save ourselves. God loves us - even when we don't love him. God believes in us - even when we're totally preoccupied with the crises of life.

"Even in the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me... If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shll hold me."

This story was a favorite of the early church during the years of persecution. So to us - it speaks of a God whose love for us is constant: a God who will come to us in crisis — despair, anxiety, sickness, death - whatever. You can expect it - you can count on it.

Perhaps when all is said and done, a hymn says it best. Out of a life time of misery and sickness George Mathoson wrote:

"O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee,
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain that
Morn shall tearless be" AMEN

Father, we are grateful that your love for us does not depend on our faith. We are grateful that in the crises of our lives we can depend on your presence. We are grateful that in Jesus Christ you have found us. AMEN